

## Statement on Incident of Sexual Misconduct, FAQ & GRACE Training

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### Statement From the Elders on July 14, 2019

The elders of Bethlehem will share the following statement at our Sunday services across all campuses on July 14, 2019:

The elders of Bethlehem want to inform the congregation that last year, an incident occurred in which a juvenile engaged in sexual misconduct against a child in our Early Childhood Ministry at a Bethlehem campus. When a Bethlehem leader learned of the situation through a letter sent by the victim's parents, he immediately called law enforcement, which began an investigation. Bethlehem cooperated in this investigation, which is now concluded, though certain legal proceedings may continue. Law enforcement's investigation identified only one isolated incident, but even one incident is too many.

We take this matter very seriously and are heartbroken and grieve for the families that have been affected by this incident. We are grateful for the courage of anyone, especially a young child, who speaks out about abuse. If you have any information about child abuse or suspected child abuse, we encourage you to contact local authorities immediately. We share this statement and information to inform the congregation as we move forward to identify any ways to improve our child protection policies & procedures and to provide additional training for Bethlehem's leaders, staff, and volunteers. As we attempt to protect the identities of the young people and families involved, we have concluded that it is appropriate to share only limited information.

We have engaged [GRACE](#) (Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment) to help us to continue to fulfill our priority of protecting the next generation and to help us find any ways that could better safeguard the children of Bethlehem. GRACE will provide training for our leadership on Saturday, August 3, and for the entire congregation on the weekend of August 10/11 at each campus. We pray that God will heal those affected by this situation, especially the young victim, and help and guide our congregation as we move forward.

## **FAQ**

### **1. When did Bethlehem find out about the incident? When were civil authorities notified?**

After the victim's family notified Bethlehem of an incident of sexual misconduct through a written letter, the pastor responsible for the ministry area immediately notified both county child protective services and the local police department. The police opened an investigation, and Bethlehem cooperated with the investigator to determine the offender. Once the juvenile offender was identified, this person was removed from all contact with children's ministries at Bethlehem and additional precautions described below were implemented.

### **2. How did we guard against the offender hurting other children?**

After we learned of the incident, the offender was immediately removed from serving in any capacity. The offender was also restricted in regard to off-site youth activities and required to have an adult chaperone at all times while at Bethlehem. Bethlehem ultimately determined that the offender should be restricted from attending the Bethlehem campus where the incident occurred. The offender no longer attends Bethlehem, and Bethlehem is working to ensure that appropriate precautions are taken so that the offender is not a threat to the church body at the offender's new congregation. We pray for the offender and the offender's family.

### **3. How do I know if my child was in the same ministry area as this individual?**

Parents of children who were present in the ministry area where the juvenile served have been contacted and informed. This group was determined based on attendance records and check-in information. If you have not been contacted, our records showed that your child was not in the ministry area in question.

### **4. Why wasn't the congregation immediately notified of the incident?**

We aimed to respect the privacy of the families involved. We were cooperating with law enforcement in their investigation. The investigation took months to come to a conclusion, and legal proceedings are still in process. Because of this, and since the incident involved children, we did not believe we should immediately make the incident known beyond those immediately involved.

### **5. Why have you not shared the specific dates, names, and ages of the individuals, or other information about the incident?**

Based on our understanding of the law and the ages of the individuals involved, we believe it is important to safeguard the privacy of the individuals and families directly involved in this incident to the extent possible.

### **6. How should parents talk to their children about sexual abuse?**

We believe it is important for parents to have conversations with their children about sexual abuse so that they are able to identify inappropriate, unsafe, and abusive behavior. Parents, we encourage you to have open communication with your children about these difficult topics. Here are a few ways to engage your children about sexual abuse:

- **Attend to Warning Signs:** As parents, we encourage you to watch for [warning signs of possible sexual abuse](#) in your child. If you have questions or concerns about behaviors your child is exhibiting, please contact the Care & Counseling staff at your campus.
- **Give Age-Appropriate Instruction:** We also encourage you to provide age-appropriate instruction to your child about safe and healthy touch. [God Made All of Me](#) is a helpful book on this topic that is designed for children ages 2–8. Additionally, the authors of the book outlined [9 Ways to Protect Your Children From Sexual Abuse](#) in a related blog post. If you would like help thinking through how to navigate these discussions with your child, please reach out to the Care & Counseling staff or one of the agencies listed below.
- **Establish Healthy Boundaries:** We encourage you to take time as a family to discuss and establish healthy boundaries. The article “[Everyday Actions to Keep Kids Safe](#)” shares several ways to set clear boundaries for touch and privacy.
- **Be Prepared to Respond:** If you have questions about warning signs that you notice, we encourage you to contact the Care & Counseling staff at your campus to discuss your concerns and receive information about care and counseling options. If you prefer, you can seek out an area counseling agency that specializes in sources of childhood trauma. Below is a list of counseling agencies that offer various approaches. We encourage families to prayerfully research which option is best for them.
  - [Minnesota Renewal Center](#) (St. Paul)
  - [New Path Mental Health Services](#) (Golden Valley)
  - [Redemption Twin Cities](#) (Minneapolis)
  - [Relate Counseling Center](#) (Minnetonka)
  - [Watershed Psychological Services](#) (Blaine)
  - [Counseling Care](#) (Lake Elmo)

The article “[What Should I Do After a Child Tells?](#)” offers some helpful tips for how you can provide support to your child if they disclose information leading you to suspect sexual abuse. If your child does share something concerning, we encourage you to respond well by staying calm, affirming their disclosure, and contacting civil authorities (i.e., your local police department) to make a report. If you would like support in taking this step, don’t hesitate to ask for help from the church or a trusted counselor.

## **7. How was the juvenile present in a ministry area? How was the juvenile alone with the young child?**

It is our policy that volunteers are never alone with children. The juvenile was not alone with the young child. Bethlehem has allowed juveniles to serve in the ministry area in question when adults are present. This juvenile filled out an application, had an interview, and was approved to serve in the ministry area. We do not run background checks on youth (and we understand that almost all the information that would be searched in an adult background check is non-public data where youth are concerned), but we do run background checks on all adults serving with infants, children, those with disabilities, and youth. We have been unable to determine how this incident occurred unnoticed while other workers were in the room.

## **8. What do I do if I suspect my child was a victim of abuse?**

If you suspect your child was a victim of abuse, please contact civil authorities (i.e., your local police department) to make a report. If you believe an incident happened at Bethlehem, please contact the Care & Counseling staff or an elder you trust at your campus. Our leaders desire to serve and shepherd you along in this process through prayer, counsel, and other help as

appropriate. You may also contact the Care & Counseling staff or other leaders for care and referrals that may be needed regardless of whether an issue involved Bethlehem.

**9. If I am troubled by this information, what resources or help are available for me?**

We recognize that this news is troubling. You may be overwhelmed by a sense of grief, sadness, helplessness, or a range of other emotions. This incident may have resurfaced your own personal traumatic or abusive experiences. We want to help you process this grief and sadness. Elders will be on hand and available on Sundays, July 14 & 21, after the services and in the prayer rooms at the respective campuses to pray for any who may need additional care or support. If you would like to receive counseling or additional help, please contact a Care & Counseling staff person at your campus.

**10. How do I know this won't happen at Bethlehem again?**

We are continuing to work hard to identify any ways to strengthen our child protection policies, and we will continually seek to learn more about protecting the vulnerable. We grieve that this incident occurred at our church, and we grieve over the impact it has on the families affected, especially the young victim. Currently (as in the past), all adult workers are screened through an application process, interview, background check, reference checks, and a signed ministry covenant. Youth workers currently undergo the same screening process, with the exception of a background check and ministry covenant. We will seek to implement any changes that result from the GRACE assessment and training. We have current worker-to-child ratios that meet or exceed state guidelines for daycare centers.

Looking ahead, we have invited GRACE to help our church implement any additional best practices to continue to protect the vulnerable and to pursue Safeguarding Certification. This will include training for every level of the church, establishing a safeguarding team, receiving an on-site building risk assessment, and implementing specific steps to create a healing environment for survivors.

We live in a fallen world, so we cannot say with complete certainty that something like this will never happen again. We plan to apply the highest degree of vigilance to the implementation of and adherence to our policies and training. We plan to evaluate our policies on an annual basis and make changes to keep our policies updated according to the changing needs of our world.

**11. What are Bethlehem's worker-to-child ratios in the nursery and preschool classes?**

We have the following worker-to-child ratios, compared with current state guidelines for child care centers:

<b>Age Category</b>	<b>Bethlehem Policy Staff-to-Child Ratio</b>	<b>State Guidelines* Staff-to-Child Ratio</b>
Infant	1:2	1:4
Toddler	1:3	1:7
2 & 3-year-olds	1:4+	1:7+
Preschooler	1:8	1:10

*\*<https://www.dhs.state.mn.us/main/groups/licensing/documents/defaultcolumns/dhs-292309.pdf>*

## **12. Why is this information being shared?**

We are sharing this information now because we are conducting additional training efforts, and we want to emphasize their importance. The police investigation is also complete, and we want you to know Bethlehem is not immune to such things.

We grieve over this incident and the impact it has on the young victim and the victim's family. We are called to weep with those who weep, especially in the blood-bought family of God. Knowledge of this incident will help us all see why our upcoming trainings and GRACE consultation is so important for the ongoing protection of our children.

## **13. Should I be worried about overnight events for Middle & High School students?**

We take the protection of our Middle & High School students very seriously. Along with written guidelines and policies for our regular ministry, we have specific guidelines for our All-Church Winter Retreat and Summer Camp. GRACE is currently reviewing these policies to help us further strengthen them. We would be glad to share these policies with parents or with others who desire to review them. Each campus is also able to provide details on the precautions they take for their specific events and retreats. We welcome you to contact your campus's youth leadership to request more information.

## **14. How can I become educated about child sex abuse?**

You can find commonly asked questions on child sex abuse, questions related to prevention and treatment, and ongoing education at GRACE under [Common Questions](#).

## **15. What is Bethlehem's policy on reporting sexual abuse?**

The following is an excerpt from Bethlehem's *Employee Handbook*:

*All Bethlehem pastors, ministers, and employees must report any form of known or suspected neglect, physical abuse, or sexual abuse according to this policy and applicable law. Because of the seriousness of neglect and abuse, Bethlehem encourages those subject to this policy to err on the side of reporting information known to them.*

*Failure to report as required by this policy may result in discipline, up to and including termination of employment, and may also result in church discipline. Any Bethlehem pastors, ministers, or employees who are required by law to report may also face criminal penalties based on a failure to report knowledge of known or suspected neglect or physical or sexual abuse that is occurring or has occurred within the preceding three years.*

Additional information, requirements, steps, and information are included in the *Employee Handbook*.

## **16. Will our church participate in the [Caring Well](#) initiative that was recently released from the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission and the Sexual Abuse Advisory Group of the Southern Baptist Convention?**

Currently, we believe that inviting GRACE will help us improve and update our policies, procedures, practices, and care for victims, and will help us protect and care well for our children. We may seek to integrate other resources and best practices along the way as we learn more.

## **GRACE Training in August 2019**

[GRACE](#) (Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment) is an organization founded by Boz Tchividjian in 2004 to help “equip the Church with a vision for authentic community, where responsibility, accountability, and compassion are second nature and caring for children and adult survivors of abuse are non-negotiable.” GRACE is an outside organization that we have sought out to help us with education, training, and assessment to ensure that we are safe for the most vulnerable entrusted to our care.

We believe that the insights, best practices, and outside assessment of an experienced organization like GRACE will help us to continue to fulfill our mandate and priority of protecting and discipling the next generation, and help us to do everything in our power to safeguard the children of Bethlehem.

GRACE will provide two different trainings for our church. A four-hour leadership training will be held for all church leaders to cover various issues and topics. An additional four-hour training will be held for all adult congregants to attend.

We’ve scheduled three campus-specific training times for the congregational training, each lasting four hours. Congregants are encouraged to attend whichever training time and location best fits their schedule.

- Saturday, August 10, 8:30am–12:30pm, North Campus (Mounds View)
- Saturday, August 10, 2–6pm, South Campus (Lakeville)
- Sunday, August 11, 1–5pm, Downtown Campus (Minneapolis)

### **1. What will the congregational training cover?**

GRACE’s All-Adult Training is designed to give every adult the education and tools needed to put into practice the policy of the church. Everyone in a church plays a role in keeping children safe. The safest church is an informed, equipped church.

The training is divided into four segments:

1. Facing the Reality of Child Abuse in the Church
2. Responding to the Impact of Abuse
3. Understanding Offenders and Their Tactics
4. Your Role in Prevention and Response

The training will address such questions as ...

- What does the Bible have to say about abuse?
- How prevalent is child abuse in the U.S. and in our churches?
- What are common myths about abuse?
- How do we care for survivors of abuse?

- What are common indicators of child abuse, and why do abused children need professional care?
- How do we recognize and respond to troubling behavior without being paranoid?
- How do we prevent abuse?
- How and when do we report abuse?
- How do children normally disclose abuse?

## **2. Who will attend the leaders' training and what will it cover?**

The four-hour training for church leadership will be for all pastoral and support staff, elders, deacons, ministers, directors, coordinators, and other lay leaders. This training is designed to give leaders the tools to continue to cultivate a church culture that prevents abuse. The broad topics covered will include the following:

- Biblical Foundation on Abuse: God, the Church, and Abuse
- Leaders, Power, and Safe Church Communities
- The Church's Mission and Protecting the Vulnerable
- Types of Abuse and Basic Abuse Dynamics
- Overcoming Denial in the Church
- Responding Well to Victims and Offenders in the Church
- Policy and Prevention Best Practices
- Reporting and Response Best Practices

## **3. Will all volunteers be required to attend the congregational training?**

Yes. All adult volunteers who work with children or youth will be required to attend the adult training for congregants or to view the training sessions. (Youth workers will go through equivalent training.) We will record the training and make it available to all volunteers and adults in the congregation to view so that we can all be involved in cultivating a culture that prevents abuse.

## **4. If I can't make the training, what do I do?**

We will record the full four-hour training and make it available to congregants to view.

## **Contact**

If you have any questions about the incident, the FAQ, or the upcoming training with GRACE, please reach out to an elder or your campus pastor: [Ken Currie](#) (Downtown), [Steven Lee](#) (North), or [Dave Zuleger](#) (South).